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Making Sure Your Emails Land - and Are Accessible

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A nonprofit's email list contains valuable contact information for donors, board members, community members and other stakeholders, event participants, alumni, volunteers, members, and advocates. Being able to email them reliably, and having confidence that emails will land in their inboxes and not in their spam folders, is crucial to any nonprofit's engagement strategy. We've assembled seven "dos and don'ts" that can help you make sure your emails are seen and your audiences engaged in advancing your nonprofit's mission.

Do: A little bit of spring cleaning

High open and click rates help preserve message deliverability. One way to keep your open and click rates high is to keep an eye on your list for unengaged subscribers. If someone hasn't opened a single message from you in the last year, assess whether it's time to remove them from the list. Some groups send a message to those "unengaged" subscribers asking them to confirm whether or not they still want to receive messages, then unsubscribe everyone who says no or does not respond.

Don't: Buy a list

The easiest way to increase your spam score and reduce deliverability is to add people to your list who haven't consented to receive messages from you, then have them instantly unsubscribe and report your message as spam. Some email providers keep an eye on when you import a list and monitor your response rate after sending messages to those new contacts. Some even have you check a box to confirm that all imported contacts have consented to receive messages from you. If the provider sees a lot of unsubscribes or spam complaints, they may suspend or cancel your account with them.

Do: Test your messages

Most platforms feature the ability to conduct "A/B tests," where you send two different versions of a message to random portions of your list, then send the more successful version to the rest of the list. This is helpful not only for that message, but also for future messages, as you can learn what framing is most impactful for your audience. Another cool feature some email providers offer is the ability to send at ideal times for your subscribers. Based on the timing of when they have opened past messages from you, the system will send your message in batches over the course of 24 hours to have the message land in inboxes at the best time to increase your chances of getting that message opened.

Don't: Sell your list

The #1 inquiry submitted via our contact form from people who don't work for nonprofits is, "How can I stop the dozens of solicitations I'm receiving from nonprofits I have never connected with?" Almost every person who reaches out with that inquiry can tell us with near certainty which nonprofit that they supported shared their contact information. Guess which nonprofit is never receiving donations again - and whose messages that person now plans to report as spam?

Do: Check the content of your messages

Before you launch a message, use a spam checking service, such as those from [mail-tester](#) and [Experte](#) to assess deliverability. These services have you send a

draft version of your email to them, then create a report on potential deliverability issues in about 30 seconds. They look at everything from whether your email address is on a blacklist to the various aspects of the message itself that can affect deliverability, such as broken links and whether your message includes any words that a spam filter might flag (like “Act Now” or “Limited Time Offer”). The spam checker’s report can help you tweak your message before you send it out so it will land in inboxes, rather than spam folders.

Don’t: Forget accessibility

The spam checkers also look at whether all of your images have [“alt” tags](#), which are just one part of [ensuring your messages are accessible](#). Readers with visual impairment may be using a screen reader to view your message. If you don’t have alt tags, that screen reader can’t let your reader know what your images are depicting. If you are promoting an event and the bulk of your message is a large image describing the event and where and when it will take place, but you haven’t included an alt tag on the image, part of your audience won’t be able to find out about it. Similarly, when you are linking text in your message, it should be clear just from those linked words where the link will lead. Using just “click here” or “more” as your link means that some of your readers won’t know where those links lead and will be less likely to click. Instead, use phrases such as “click here for more event details,” or “read more about how we’re making a difference.” These practices aren’t just for ensuring messages land in someone’s inbox; they are about ensuring an equitable experience for everyone who receives those messages from your nonprofit.

Do: Authenticate your email

Spam checkers also look at whether you have configured [Domain Keys Identified Mail \(DKIM\) and Sender Policy Framework \(SPF\)](#) to authenticate that the message is coming from you. Most email providers will help you ensure DKIM and SPF are set up if you reach out to their support team.

Not only is it important to perform regular maintenance on your list, but spam filters are always changing how they look at messages. Those filtering companies are in constant conflict with spammers, with each making adjustments to try to outsmart the other. You’ll also need to stay up-to-date on changes that can affect your ability

to track opens and clicks, including this [recent change implemented by Apple to improve privacy](#). Ensuring email deliverability is an ongoing process, but one that's vital for ensuring your nonprofit's messages reach its constituencies.

Additional Resources

- [6 Tips for Nonprofits to Improve Their Email Deliverability and Raise More Money Online](#) (TechSoup)
- [Can your brand be more accessible?](#) (Big Duck)
- [Accessibility in Email Marketing](#) (MailChimp)
- [How to Improve Your Nonprofit Email's Sending Reputation](#) (Keela)
- [Want to increase online giving? Start with an audit.](#) (Big Duck)
- [What Apple's privacy changes mean for email open rates](#) (M+R)